



Food Glorious Food

AN INTERVIEW WITH
Karen Karp
Karen Karp & Partners
Mary Maher Interviewer

INTRODUCTION

Marilee Jennings

Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose

In June 2015, Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose (CDM) opened FoodShed, a reimagined café in the center of the museum and offering delicious, healthy, and fresh food to visitors of all ages. The two-year project was not just about serving better food, but about the organizational change instigated in response to visitor requests.

With the help of New York-based food consultant Karen Karp, the museum ended the disconnect between the healthy nutrition messages of its exhibits, programs, and outdoor gardens and the food you could actually eat on-site. To begin the process, the museum had to overcome two hurdles: 1) board hesitation (cafés in cultural institutions are usually considered money-losers), and 2) partner loyalty and resistance to change (the existing café had been run for many years by an organization that worked with adults with disabilities).

A visionary funder underwrote the planning process during which Karp built a profile of the local audience and the food community. Karp also presented the board with several financial models that showed that the significant investment in a new café was not only good for the mission, but would eventually generate enough income to pay for itself and produce a profit. After engaging San Francisco-based,

"food-forward" BCV Architects, a local caterer who ran an interim operation during café construction, and spending nine months testing menu and audience, the board committed to funding FoodShed as a capital project.

In FoodShed, kids can watch fresh food being prepared and can choose their own meal from an array of wholesome, nutritious (and delicious!) foods neatly assembled in a fun-to-use bento box. Initially some people missed the old food vendors along with their popular French fries and soda, but the sophisticated design and updated menus of the new café resulted in many more people eating at the museum. Throughout the process, Karp was instrumental in keeping museum staff and board focused on the long goal: the importance of healthy food in everyone's lives. Visitors and staff are now happier, the café is better aligned with the museum's mission, and the board is very pleased with the bottom line.

Karen Karp is a fourth generation food entrepreneur. Her great grandfather Morris, a first generation immigrant from Ukraine,

opened a butter, eggs, and cheese wholesale outlet on Manhattan's far west side, and later a feed and seed company on Coney Island Avenue in Brooklyn.

Karp grew up visiting farms with her father, but moved to New York City in 1978 where she attended Parsons School of Design. Restaurant jobs put food on the table and by the age of twenty-nine, Karp had grown a trendy downtown restaurant group from one to six outlets. Establishing Karp Resources in 1990, Karen developed a range of bespoke strategies that explored the interconnections between agriculture, food, policy, and people, and how to marry common interests of the for-profit and non-profit sectors.

In 2001 Karen obtained a master's degree in Sustainability from the University of Bath School of Management, and in her thesis, "How Does Food Sustain Us?" explored how leaders convey and impart their personal food values within their organizations, and how these communities are then transformed through food.

Karp works to change the way a wide range of people—corporate executives, school officials, distributors, educators, and farmers—think about how food is produced, processed, and distributed, and she encourages them to overcome challenges and pursue innovation.

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thenticity with middle ground. That become one of the most interesting challenges.

MAHER: Did you involve people in the community from various cultures in helping develop the menus?

KARP: Absolutely! During many days of observation in the café, we saw the food that people were bringing to the museum to eat with their kids. We also talked to people about how they chose what to buy from the current café and whether they felt that they had enough choices that met their needs. And from people who brought their own food, why did you bring your own food? Because it's cheaper? Because your kids have food allergies or other family dietary preferences? Or, is it because you know your kids will eat it?

One of the main reasons we were selected to do this project is that we've done a lot of work with school food programs all across the country. Kids visiting the Children's Discovery Museum are not much different from the thousands of other kids we've already studied. We've conducted evaluations underwritten by the Kellogg Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in a number of school environments. We've done studies and programs about procurement and product and menu development for school meals, elementary through high school—that's what informed this project. How is the movement to improve children's health playing out in other places where children are encountering food? What's successful, and where can we be a little more innovative because we don't have the USDA hanging over our heads. There was never any intention not to meet or beat the USDA's nutritional profile, but museums are not required to follow the same restrictions that schools are. So we could take the best of what was happening in schools and combine it with our own sense and aesthetic about what kind of food would match the promise of everything else that goes on in the museum.



In FoodShed, the “Rainbow Counter” was specifically designed so kids could watch fresh foods being prepared. Says Karp, “We worked together to identify entrees that would appeal to kids and we created new recipes that featured healthier ways to prepare them, for instance, turkey meatballs and whole grain mac and cheese. The bento box concept enabled us to serve those entrees as well as two fresh, seasonal produce options that children could select themselves, at the specially designed “Rainbow Counter.”



MAHER: Marilee said, “Running a café in a children's museum is not a gold mine.” Museum boards are hesitant to change when it could adversely affect the bottom line. You provided financial models that persuaded the board that a better quality café would not only be part of their mission, but in fact, grow into a successful operation financially. How do you develop these models?

KARP: I've been designing financial models for food service operations for over thirty years. At the start of my food career I managed all sorts of restaurants—small, big, fancy, not so fancy, family-friendly, not family-friendly. I developed a group of six restaurants in New York City in as many years that were family-friendly, but also a little hip and cool and very moderately priced. When I started my consulting business, that's the shingle that I hung out. My interest in broader food issues grew, but I know the operations side of restaurants like the back of

my hand. We looked at the financials of the existing café and those of cafés in many other children's museums we visited. So we had some comparables. We knew what it cost to support a museum café, including indirect costs such as percentages of rent, utilities, maintenance, and even security. In the partnership with its previous food vendor, the museum had never allocated cost shares for those things. We wanted everyone to think as much as possible about the new café as an independent business.

MAHER: What were the next steps in the café transformation process?

KARP: The first and most critical hurdle was identifying the right operator, or identifying one that could be successful. It was an arduous process because we wanted the café to be professionally run. We looked at potential operators and their structures, menus, and price points. Then we considered how it would work for the vendor and for the museum. A lot of museums pay the vendors to be there, because it's an amenity. We didn't want that type of arrangement, but

we didn't want museum staff to be running the restaurant either. We ultimately hired Nicole Jacobi who was operating a successful lunch catering business but had never run a restaurant. We were able to work with her over the course of about nine months developing menus and testing recipes. For instance, we worked together to come up with a way to serve fresh, healthy food to kids that would both excite them and allow them to make their own choices. Developing the children's menu was a very collaborative process. We worked together to identify entrees that would appeal to kids and we created new recipes that featured healthier ways to prepare them, for instance, turkey meatballs and whole grain mac and cheese. The bento box concept enabled us to serve those entrees as well as two fresh, seasonal produce options that children could select themselves, at the specially designed “Rainbow Counter.”

MAHER: The Children's Discovery Museum has a long history of exhibits and programs about health and wellness. They were one of the first museums to start outdoor garden programs in 1992. They are longtime supporters of ACM's Good To Grow initiative. What tipped the balance and finally made them want to step up their own food offerings?

KARP: It was a combination of the health and wellness program momentum going on among many foundations and social service organizations, along with the increase in everyone's food focus all over the country. But honestly, every day Marilee listened to staff and visitors comment about the disconnect between the excitement happening everywhere in the museum and in the gardens but not in the café.

MAHER: What was your first impression of the food scene at Children's Discovery Museum before the project began?

KARP: The first time I visited the museum in spring 2012, six months before we started working with them, Marilee gave me a tour. The café was located in a quadrangle called Main Street. Marilee said one of the biggest problems they had was that the café, which wasn't making any money and didn't have great food, was taking up one-quarter of their most valuable floor space. The board considered the café a revenue center, although it had never been one, so they didn't want to lose it. Since the museum's mission was about learning experiences, they thought about moving the café somewhere away from the quad, freeing up valuable museum real estate while maintaining a key visitor amenity. I said, "You don't know the asset you have that few other museums do. They already have their cafés off to the side. If you want to marry your mission to visitor amenities, you're in the best possible physical situation to make it happen. This can be your showcase for food and health. It's a natural—it's already an exhibition space." So we decided to work on convincing the board that this was an opportunity—changing the café to match the museum's health vision by functioning like their other exhibits did. It would be thoughtfully and beautifully designed, fun for kids, a programmable space, and also offer great food for all visitors.

MAHER: You have extensive experience in the food world, but how does it translate into the world of children's museums?

KARP: I'm very familiar with museums from my early days in New York study-

ing sculpture and printmaking at Parsons School of Design. I visited a lot of museums, especially art museums and cultural institutions. Even though I was still making art, I was getting more and more interested in the interconnection between art and food.

In the early '90s, just after I began my food business, my first museum client, the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, asked me to reimagine and rebrand their café. They had the typical uninspired food offerings in a main cafeteria and in a little satellite café. I worked with them to create a café theme and seasonal menus. The theme was inspired by the biggest part of their permanent collection, Impressionism. In order to come up with that menu, I looked at where and how food was depicted in the Impressionist paintings, specifically in the paintings and sculptures in their collection. We designed a menu and named the dishes for scenes in Edouard Manet's *The Picnic*, for example, or introduced specific foods or food combinations seen in Cézanne's still lifes and Degas's landscapes.

A few years later, I worked for the National Storytelling Association, based in Jonesboro, Tennessee. They hold a global storytelling festival every October attended by thousands of people from around the world. They hired architect Robert A.M. Stern to design and build the International Storytelling Center. Stern then hired me to do two things: 1) design the menus for food sold in the main hall and also in a little downtown café next to the museum; and 2) work with the landscape architects to design an edible vegetable, herb, and heirloom fruit garden.

Most recently we worked with the Children's Museum of Manhattan on its exhibit *EatSleepPlay*TM. One of its main components was a fruit and vegetable cart modeled on the New York City Green Cart Initiative, an initiative that my organization project-managed for over four years. We also helped plan events to promote *EatSleepPlay*TM.

MAHER: How did you become involved with the Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose?

KARP: The first point of connection was through The Health Trust, an organization that both runs programs and funds other organizations' programs with the overarching mission of making Silicon Valley the healthiest region in America. The Health Trust had already hired us to bring the Green Cart concept to San Jose. So we'd been working for them for a couple of years researching

and testing feasibility, working on policy around vending, zoning, and other technical issues surrounding any food access concept. The Health Trust was one of a number of foundations, including Kaiser Permanente and The David & Lucile Packard Foundation, bolstering the museum's increasing role in supporting children's and family health. With support from a local visionary funder, the CEO of the Health Trust, I was hired to begin the planning component of the project.

MAHER: We can see what the museum hoped to gain from this change, but how did you determine what the visitors wanted?

KARP: We gathered that information a couple of ways. The museum had hired a professional evaluator to gather information about the newly-renovated *Rainbow Market* exhibit, which had been relocated adjacent to the doors to the outdoor *Kids' Garden*. They were able to add questions to their interviews with diverse families visiting the museum to help guide our thinking and decision-making. Then, working with a local colleague, who eventually became project manager on the job, we conducted our own intercept surveys with visitors, asking their opinions about current food service and what they might like in the future. We also did a wide environmental scan of cafés and other kinds of food services in children's cultural institutions in the Bay Area and north to Seattle just to understand what museums were doing to push the intersection between health and food agenda forward.

MAHER: What did you find out about visitors at CDM? What kind of food did adults want their children to have? What did the adults want for themselves?

KARP: That is the million dollar question. Fortunately, we didn't have to look too hard for the answer. If you've ever been to the museum it's obvious. The demographic composition of CDM visitors is very broadly diversified. Every sign in the museum is in Spanish, English, and Vietnamese because major segments of the local population speak languages other than English. San Jose is a melting pot. So with that kind of demographic, we knew that whatever the food was offered at the museum, it had to do more than just acknowledge the cultural diversity—it had to cater to it. One of the challenges in catering to cultural diversity is to not go too far with foods in any one cultural direction, but to try to match au-

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We also worked closely with Nicole to develop a menu that was both streamlined and efficient to prepare and serve, but reflected the wide and delicious cultural diversity of San Jose. We ended up with a menu that incorporates a variety of grab-and-go salads and sandwiches, made fresh daily from high-quality ingredients, and a “Special Feature” item which changes monthly and provides a way to offer items that are from different cuisines or are aligned with seasonal or cultural celebrations the museum is observing. For the first month, the featured item was a Vietnamese-inspired lemongrass chicken or tofu dish, available as a Banh Mi sandwich, over rice, or as a salad.

Our collaboration with an architect who shared our vision was also a key part of this process. We hired BCV Architects, a firm that had designed The Ferry Building, a food landmark in San Francisco. We worked with them—and relied on their deep restaurant experience—to help make sure the design reflected the museum’s priorities: mainly, engaging children and their families in a unique, inspiring café space. Touches like a lowered counter with a mirror placed above it, so children can see the colorful produce options, helped achieve those goals. Also, they enable the café space to be used for demos and cooking classes in the future.

MAHER: FoodShed opened June 15th. What kind of feedback have you heard?

KARP: Wendy Weiden, my San Francisco-based staff person, visits the museum once every week or so and spends time in the café talking to people and just observing things. Parents have told her, “I just wanted to thank you for doing this. You have alleviated the stress that I experience whenever I take my child out to eat, because they want junk food and I’m trying to find something healthy. It is always a battle or a negotiation. In FoodShed we don’t have that because all the choices are good. There isn’t a single thing on this menu that I wouldn’t want my child to eat. It is a joyful, stressless experience for us.”

And then the kids. As mentioned earlier, FoodShed’s signature dish is presented in a bento box, Nicole’s idea. She has twins who don’t like to mix their foods. So, kids choosing the bento box meal go through the line and look at choices including seasonal fruits and vegetables and they say, “I want a little of this, a little of that, some of that, etc.” Wendy sees a kid pointing to broccoli and telling his mother, “I want that!” And

the mother says, “You don’t want that. You don’t like broccoli.” But the kid insists, “No, I want that. I love it.” Wendy suggested to the person working in the café, “Why don’t you give this little boy a sample?”, thinking the mother needs to see that the kid likes it in order to agree. The irony here is we have a parent fighting with a kid who wants the healthy choice—a raw, cut-up vegetable. The beauty of this story is not only was this conversation going on—and that alone signaled a huge behavior change—but luckily Wendy was there to intercept and take action, because the café staff probably wouldn’t have thought to do that. That helped us think about more training for the café staff to help them navigate those possibly transformative moments. One of the key lessons in school meal reform is when kids come home and tell their parents that they ate something new at school and they ask the parents to purchase it. That’s when the change happens in that household. Parents’ buy-in is critical. Adults are too old to change behavior.

MAHER: Did you work with exhibit or program staff to try to mesh what went on in the café with existing themes and initiatives in the museum?

KARP: I learned about everything that they were doing and planning to do, particularly in the garden. With exhibits like the *Rainbow Market* and the *Kids’ Garden*, there are many opportunities to program FoodShed activities in the future.

MAHER: What did you learn about children’s museums from this project? Any surprises?

KARP: Marilee’s attitude, perspective, and vision are infectious. She is one of the warmest, smartest, and most genuine people I have ever worked for, and I’ve had 500 clients over twenty-five years. Creating FoodShed required strong leadership. It was a great idea for the museum and the people it serves, and we helped make it happen, but for the museum, ending a long-term relationship with Hope Services, an organization serving people with disabilities, was a cultural transformation at every level: board, staff, visitors. They were offered the opportunity to continue, but they couldn’t meet the expanded needs of the museum and its audience while still serving their clients. The museum creates new exhibits all the time, but food is more elemental and personal to people’s sense of their own well-being. 

